Connections in Reference Work:
Cross-department collaboration and patron engagement

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All I did was ask a question. “Do you think we can make a model?” Wait, let me back up a bit.

A few months ago, I got an email from a 12-year-old researcher who told me he was blind. The young man is an avid fan of the Lockheed YO-3A “Quiet Star” aircraft. He had many technical questions about the aircraft, particularly about the sound, or lack thereof, it makes. With much help from Evan Elliot, our Aircraft Maintenance and Operations Manager, I was able to answer most of them. He had so many questions that Evan offered to hold a special touch tour for the young researcher. However, he lives across the country and is not able to visit. At one point, the researcher asked if I knew where he could find a model of the aircraft. He had tried to find one, but everything he found was out of his price range. I did some searching but I encountered the same issue. So, I suggested that if he could find model plans, perhaps a local library had a 3-D printer and could help make one or help him source somewhere to make one.

A few days later, I sat in on a meeting with our Exhibits team about an upcoming exhibit. As they provided updates and insights on the planning, they shared a 3-D piece that they had recently made using their new 3-D Prusa® printer. There are various materials to print with depending on the application but for starting with, and for curatorial purposes, the Exhibits team has started with ‘PLA’ and ‘PETG’ for their ease of printability and very low VOC off-gassing.

It was news to me they had a 3-D printer and as I sat there holding the piece the Exhibits team made, I thought it would be so cool if we could make even a basic model for this young man. I turned to our Senior Curator, Matthew Burchette, and asked, “Do you think we can make a model for ____?” Matthew liked the idea and spoke with Tad Cornwell, Senior Graphic Designer in Exhibits. Tad was eager to explore how to create and print a 3-view in relief, as how to better serve our low-vision and/or blind patrons has been a topic of discussion and thought for some time.

A couple of weeks later I was handed a 2-D tile that features a touch-outline 3-view of the YO-3A (pictured below). The tile is a square gray piece of plastic with a black bar of Braille along the top and the three touch-outlines of the YO-3A aircraft below that. The views are side, top down, and front-facing. The Braille on the top is the aircraft name. I was thrilled and couldn’t wait to send it to the young man, though I did advise him that it’s a prototype and likely won’t be perfect right out of the gate. He was very excited and replied with, “I’m so happy you guys could figure something out. I appreciate it when people understand when you say, ‘I’m blind.’ Some will just say, ‘Yeah sorry, can’t help you.’ I can’t wait to see this! I’ll give you some feedback once I get it, so you know what to fix.”
After its arrival, the young man reached out with very positive feedback:

“All-in-all, I think you guys did awesome. On the 3rd one on the bottom, I see like a curved bulge on the top, which I presume to be like the canopy where the pilot and observer are sitting. Very cool. I can see the evidence of the wheels, the wings, and the tail. You can notice how the wings are long and narrow like on a glider. Which makes sense. Thank you so much for understanding how blind people work. It almost makes me cry. Oh, and I also like how you guys Brailled on the top the name of the airplane. Obviously, I know what it is, but I still like how you guys did that. I think if you come across somebody else that is blind, it would be helpful to them too. I like this and I cannot wait to show everyone else. Mr. Tad, I can't thank you enough for making this tile for me. I'm just happy I have someone that understands how blind people like me work. Thanks again so much for the tile.”

Tad and I have found our correspondence with the young man insightful in a couple of ways. We both had been avoiding terminology around sight, such as the word “see.” But as we read emails from him, we noted he uses such words freely. It educated us that though he may be blind, he still sees, just in a different way.

He also helped answer a question from Tad about if people his age even use Braille in an increasingly digital world, but the researcher assured us he regularly uses it, via screen readers and, when tech fails as it does, via “old school reading.” He also told us “DO NOT listen to those myths that blind people can't do anything. I'm here to tell you from the bottom of my heart, we can.” I have no doubt about that.

His gratitude for our efforts and my replies to his numerous inquiries have been effusive and heartfelt. As a reference archivist my job is to remove barriers to access and help people with their information needs, whatever those are. I take that seriously and strive on every interaction to do the best I can. This young man’s repeated gratitude for actions I consider just part of the job underscores to me how important it is to continue to do my best every day for every researcher, regardless of age, location, or ability. It’s fulfilling and gratifying to know I’ve helped a researcher and created a positive experience for him.
Ideally, this tile will be the start of a new way to serve patrons, particularly those who have low-vision or are blind. We offer special tours but, as in this case, many people do not live close enough to take advantage, so this could be a viable tool to help broaden access and engage aviation enthusiasts, regardless of their location or ability. There are many potential uses, and I cannot wait to see what we do with it here at The Museum of Flight.